

Jamaican musher sets sights on 2009 Quest

By ECHO ROSS

There was an unmistakable buzz of excitement in the air Thursday afternoon at the Yukon Tourism Information Centre.

“Excuse me, is that Frank Turner?” asked the tourist, pointing at the musher in front of the television camera. When told no, it was in fact Hans Gatt, the tourist turned into what could best be described as a giddy teenager, running back to his group of friends and snapping numerous pictures.

You see, this tourist was from Austria, and it turns out Gatt, who originally hails from Austria but now lives in Whitehorse, has made quite a name for himself back home.

In fact, during Thursday’s press conference, the three-time Yukon Quest champion was described as “one of the most famous mushers in the world.”

It’s for that reason Danny Melville invited Gatt to take part in his latest adventure, and it should be noted the Jamaican resident and his crew are now turning their own share of heads across the globe.

Melville is the owner and founder of the Jamaican dog sled team. That’s right, dog sled. Not bobsled – although they’re used to the comparisons following the blockbuster Disney movie *Cool Runnings*.

“Out-right laughter,” smiled Melville, when asked about the typical reaction to his team. “People just crack up.”

The idea for a Jamaican dog sled team was born a few years ago, when Melville visited a fabrication shop in Edmonton, where they build dune buggys.

“I saw something that looked like a sled, but on wheels. I had no idea anything called dryland mushing existed,” he explained. “I thought, ‘If they can do that, we can do it too.’”

Melville returned to his home town of Ocho Rios and pitched the idea to his friend and well-known singer/songwriter, Jimmy Buffet, who agreed to be a sponsor along with his restaurant chain Margaritaville.

Promoting humane dog care on his island, the dog sled team was formed out of mixed breed dogs found on the street, or through the Jamaican Society for Prevention of Cruelty of Animals (JSPCA).

Through Chukka Caribbean Adventures at Chukka Cove Farm, Ocho Rios, tourists can take unique trips by dryland dog sled. Ten per cent of the proceeds from all tours goes to the JSPCA, with the hope of building a proper animal hospital in Jamaica.

Lead musher Devon Anderson is also the operations manager for Melville’s tourism ventures.

Anderson and his team were featured in Palm Pictures’ documentary feature *Sun Dogs* in 2006, and they followed the first half of the 2007 Yukon Quest to get a feel for what is called the toughest sled dog race in the world.

Melville has even built a sled dog museum in Jamaica, which tells of the Yukon and its relationships with Jamaican dog sledding.

Now, the Jamaica dog sled team is looking to take their adventures one step further.

“Two of our mushers will train in Jamaica and Minnesota and our head musher, Devon Anderson, will train here with Hans,” said Melville, on his third trip to the Yukon.

“With races scheduled throughout the season in the U.S. and Canada, and the training and qualifying races to take place here in the North, we are thrilled to have the expertise of a champion like Hans to help us build a team and the skills of our mushers.

“This is not just a promotional move, we take mushing seriously and it has become part of our tourism offering in Jamaica.

“We’re dead serious about his. It’s not a joke.”

Anderson will spend this coming fall and winter in the Yukon training with Gatt, in hopes of qualifying for the 2009 Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race. Using a team of Gatt’s dogs, Anderson will need to run both a 200- and 300-mile qualifier in order to be allowed to enter the Quest.

“I look forward to getting up there and beginning my training with Hans and the team,” said Anderson in a statement. “Many people ask me how I found the cold, and I have to say it was a little shocking but the beauty of the region is amazing and to train with a three time champion of the Yukon Quest is a chance in a lifetime.”

Gatt visited Anderson and the Jamaica dog sled team in Ocho Rios earlier this year, where Melville says the two “talked about dogs all day.” Gatt said he returned to the Yukon knowing without a doubt the Jamaicans are serious about the Yukon Quest.

“If I wasn’t 100 per cent sure these guys want to go all the way to the end, I wouldn’t be doing this,” stated Gatt. “It’s a new challenge for me. My goal is to bring another musher to the finish line. I’m really looking forward to it.”

Gatt pointed out the training will cover a number of areas. He needs to help prepare Anderson not only for a race of the Quest’s distance, but also for the wilderness and elements that will be faced.

“Dog care, equipment and preparation are key,” he said.

In a statement released at the press conference, Yukon Quest manager Stephen Reynolds said organizers are pleased the Jamaican team’s visit this past winter inspired them to expand their plans and dedicate themselves to training for the Yukon Quest.

“We would like to wish Danny and Devon, their entire team, the best of luck in their endeavours.”

If all goes as planned, Anderson will be flying across the finish line in Fairbanks in 2009, Gatt waiting on the other side to congratulate him.

And who knows? Maybe five or 10 years from now it will be Anderson’s name etched in the Yukon Quest record books, surrounded by tourists wanting to snap his picture.

At the very least, it’s one heck of a feel good story. Perhaps even a blockbuster sequel. Somebody should put in a call to Disney.

“Jimmy Buffet said it put a smile on his face when he heard about it. That’s what it’s all about,” summed up Melville. For more information about Devon Anderson and the Jamaica dog sled team visit www.jamaicadogsled.com.